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ABSTRACT

Two experiments were conducted to investigate children's understanding of the relationship of narrators to the texts they narrate and how children's developing cognitive abilities influence that understanding. The subjects, 164 children aged 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10, heard a series of short passages containing several characters, one of whom was the narrator. After each passage, they were asked to identify which character had told the story. In addition, they were asked to identify the narrator when (1) the age and sex of the narrator were varied, (2) the narrator changed midnarrative, (3) the narrator differed in temporal perspective from the child, and (4) the importance of the narrator in the passage was varied. The results indicated that children understood the concept of the narrator by the time they entered elementary school. They have little difficulty in understanding narrator shifts and show no age-based biases in comprehension. Preschool males and females aged 6 to 8, however, showed same-sex biases in identifying narrators. (Passages used in the experiments are appended.) (FL)

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Technical Report No. 294

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE NARRATOR'S ROLE IN STORIES

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October 1983

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Abstract

Comprehension of the narrator's point of view in narratives is based on the understanding of what type of person the author or narrator is. Ability to identify the author/narrator was investigated in children aged 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10. The children heard a series of short passages containing several characters, one of whom was the narrator. The children were asked to answer the question "Who is telling the story?" after each one. Two experiments tested comprehension of the narrator's identity when the age and sex of the narrators were varied; when the narrator changed mid-narrative, when the narrator differed in temporal perspective from the child, and when narrator importance in the passage was varied. The results of these experiments show that children understand the concept of the narrator by the time they enter elementary school. They have little difficulty in understanding narrator shifts and show no age-based biases in comprehension. However, preschool males and females and males aged 6 to 8 years show same-sex biases in identifying narrators.

Children's Understanding of the Narrator's Role in Stories

The present study was designed to investigate children's understanding of the relationship of narrators to the texts they narrate, and how children's developing cognitive abilities influence that understanding. The study of children's understanding of the narrator can be viewed as part of the investigation of the general process by which children come to understand discourse. Much of the recent research on narratives has investigated the effects of plot structure on children's comprehension and memory for stories (e.g., Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Nezworski, Stein, & Trabasso, 1982; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Little is known, however, about children's understanding of the more "literary" aspects of text such as point of view, characterization and style.

The narrator's identity is an important aspect of point of view as it is described by literary theorists (e.g., Booth, 1961; Friedman, 1955; Moffett, 1968). According to Friedman (1955), the point of view of a story may be evaluated according to (a) who talks to the reader (author, narrator, ostensibly no one); (b) what temporal and spatial position is adopted; (c) what "channels of information" are used (author's thoughts or perceptions, or character's words, actions or internal states); and (d) at what distance the reader is placed from the story ("you are there" techniques as opposed to more distant narration). Our study focuses primarily on Friedman's first aspect of point of view, that is, who talks to the reader. Currently little is known about how children develop the ability to deal with this aspect of point of view.

Children first encounter variations in point of view through exposure to simple narratives told in conversation, and then later are exposed to the more complex aspects of point of view involved in reading books. Narratives told in the course of a conversation can have many variations in the point of view, but the point of view being taken can be made clear by context. The person physically telling the story is most frequently the narrator, so the narrator's identity and characteristics are obvious. In contrast, when someone reads a story aloud to a child, the point of view is more difficult to understand. Here, children must distinguish between the individual reading the story and the abstract narrator of the story. When children learn to read stories for themselves, they come to understand that the book, a physical object, represents an abstract narrator who tells a story.

For the rest of this paper, the term "narrator" will be used to designate the author and/or the narrator, because the narrator is usually the author's voice within a narrative (Booth, 1961). As the child develops the concept of the narrator, the child comes to know that stories are told by someone and then develops the ability to pick out the information contained in a story that provides cues to the correct narrator. In some cases, the narrator is effectively neutral, and a reader need not be very concerned with narrator identity. However, in many cases the understanding of a narrative is not complete without an understanding of the narrator. For example, in the stories of Beatrix Potter the narrator has a friendly, chatty, most distinctive personality. The narrator's commentary must be understood separately from the action of the story (Bruce, 1981). Children do not automatically understand that each story is told by an

author/narrator. Applebee's (1978) work shows that even in the primary grades many children do not completely understand the origins of fictional narratives, and only the oldest subjects (9 years old) knew that fairy tales were the creation of an imaginative author.

When the narrator is a salient, or focal character in the action of the narrative, there are many obvious cues to the point of view of the narrative. In other cases, when the narrator is not one of the actual characters in the story, there is still usually information about the narrator present in the text. Evidence about the narrator's attitudes and characteristics is available through such cues as the use of evaluative adjectives (e.g., "I had to eat the yucky peas.") Evidence for the narrator's identity may be presented in various ways: relationship to other characters ("my mother"); beliefs expressed in the narrative ("Wonder Woman is the best superhero in the world."); social role characteristics to which the author makes reference (going to kindergarten, driving a car), or even overt statements ("I am only a little girl but . . ."). When this kind of evidence is available in a text, adults are easily able to form an appropriate representation of the narrator (Hay & Brewer, Note 1). In coming to understand narrative discourse, children develop the ability to use these types of cues to construct a representation of the narrator. This study includes two experiments designed to investigate the age at which children are able to understand and identify the narrator of a story, and to determine what factors influence that ability.

Experiment 1

This experiment investigated the basic ability of young children to identify the narrator of very simple stories, where this ability was measured by the ability to answer the question "Who is telling the story?" Since young children might be prone to respond with the name of the most important character (the protagonist), the narrator's importance in the story relative to that of the other characters was controlled in our experimental passages.

Method

Materials. The passages used in this experiment were short, approximately 300 words. They were about a family, which was represented by four dolls (mother, father, boy, girl) used in the testing procedure. Each passage included several cues to the narrator's identity, but no one clue provided conclusive evidence, so that the child had to integrate information located in different parts of the text. The types of cues used were: statements of family relationship with other characters ("I turned and grabbed my mommy by the hand"); attitudes; and stereotyped role characteristics ("I was sewing a dress"). The two base narratives ("Party" and "Fishing") were each written so that there were three characters, one of whom was the first person narrator. In the Party narrative, the mother was the narrator and the other two characters were the girl and the boy. In the Fishing narrative, the girl was the narrator and the other two characters were the boy and the father.

For each base narrative, two versions (Multiple Protagonists and Nonprotagonist Narrator) were written to allow us to determine whether the children's responses were influenced by the narrator's relative importance

in the story (see examples in the Appendix). In the Multiple Protagonist versions, the two passages were written so that the characters within each narrative were of equal importance to the action of the narrative. The Nonprotagonist Narrator versions of the passages were written so that the narrator was a very minor character, and the two other characters were active protagonists. In order to determine that the narratives were balanced for character importance as we intended, the characters (including the narrator) were rated by 10 adult subjects. This rating procedure used 20 adults enrolled in an introductory psychology class. Each rater read two passages (one Multiple Protagonists narrative, and the other narrative in its Nonprotagonist Narrator form) with the order counterbalanced. The raters were asked to rate each character on a 1 to 10 scale, where 10 was defined as "very important," and 1 was defined as "not important." For the Multiple Protagonist passages, the Party passage narrator was given a mean rating of 5.5, while the mean ratings for each of the other two characters were 6.8 and 6.3. For the Fishing Multiple Protagonist passage, the narrator was given a mean rating of 7.0 compared to mean ratings of 7.5 and 7.9 for the other two characters. Comparison by t-tests show none of these differences to be statistically significant. Thus the characters in the Multiple Protagonist narratives are balanced in importance. For the Fishing Nonprotagonist Narrator passage, the narrator was given a mean importance rating of 3.7, and the two protagonists were rated 8.7 and 8.3 ($t(28) = 7.50$, $p < .05$, with the two protagonists' ratings summed and tested against the narrator's ratings). For the Party Nonprotagonist Narrator story, the mean importance rating for the narrator was 2.9 and the

means for the protagonists were 9.4 and 4.5 ($t(28) = 8.81$, $p < .05$, with the protagonists' ratings summed).

Subjects. The subjects were 64 children, 16 at each of ages 3, 4, 5 and 6. The preschool children were from two daycare centers in the Champaign/Urbana area, and the 6-year-old children attended a public elementary school. Sixteen adults from an introductory psychology class were also tested on the passages.

Procedure. All children were tested individually, in a small room away from their classrooms. The experimenter placed the doll family representing the characters on a table in front of the child, who was allowed to pick up or play with the dolls.

After introducing the doll family, the experimenter gave the child the following instructions:

> All of my stories are about these people. I want you to listen to my stories, and try to guess which one of these people is telling the story. You know that different people tell different stories. If your dad tells you a story, he might tell you about something that happened at work, or something that happened when he was a little boy. If a girl (boy) like you decided to tell a story, what kind of story would she tell (he tell)? [The child was asked to make suggestions. If the child did not, the experimenter would suggest that a child could tell "something funny or exciting that happened at school."] In each of these stories, one of the people is telling the story. Your job is to guess who is telling the story, by listening to the story very carefully.

The experimenter then read a practice passage to the child. The child was then asked "Can you guess who is telling the story?" and prompted to indicate one family member as a response by naming or pointing to one of the dolls. If the child named a family member by type of person ("a man") the answer was also accepted. If the child told the experimenter "You are telling the story," the experimenter replied, "Yes, I'm reading it, but who made it up?" This occurred only with two 4-year-olds. If the child answered the practice passage incorrectly, the experimenter told the child the right answer. The child was then read two experimental passages: one Multiple Protagonist narrative, and the other narrative in its Nonprotagonist Narrator form. Order of passages was counterbalanced. The question "Who is telling the story?" was asked after each passage. The adults were tested as a group, read the stories to themselves, and gave written answers to the narrator question for each story.

Results and Discussion

The children's responses were classified as either (a) narrator; (b) other character; or (c) noncharacter (doll family member not in the particular story). The results are given in Table 1. Two issues were

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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addressed in this study: whether the children could identify the narrator of a story, and whether the relative importance of the narrator influences narrator identification. If the children had chosen a doll randomly in answer to "Who is telling the story?" the scores would be: Narrator--25%; Other character--50%; and Noncharacter--25%. The data show an overall

increase in correct narrator identification with age. The responses were evaluated by chi-square for difference from chance performance. The 3-year-olds responded at chance for both types of passages. The 4-year-olds' responses are significantly different from chance for both types of passages ($\chi^2(2) = 8.0$ for Multiple Protagonists; $\chi^2(2) = 6.2$ for Nonprotagonist Narrator passages, $p < .05$). However, this difference is not due to an ability to identify the narrator correctly, but rather to the fact that the 4-year-olds did not name noncharacters in responding. Instead, they identified the narrator as some character in the story. Although more 5-year-olds correctly identified the narrator, their responses did not differ significantly from chance for either type of passage. The 6-year-olds were able to identify the narrator significantly more often than chance for the Multiple Protagonist passages ($\chi^2(2) = 13.5$; $p < .05$ a significant difference from picking a doll by chance; $\chi^2(1) = 6.12$, $p < .05$, a significant difference from picking a story character by chance). However, even the 6-year-olds did not identify the narrator more often than chance for the Nonprotagonist Narrator passages. From these results we can conclude that 6-year-olds can identify the narrator of the story if the narrator is an important character in the story.

This experiment was designed to allow us to determine if the children did in fact understand the question "Who is telling the story?" and were not simply answering by indicating the primary character of the story. If children were answering by indicating the protagonist of the story, they should have responded by indicating the narrator and the other two characters equally often in the Multiple Protagonists condition. For the

Nonprotagonist Narrator condition, a child with a narrator/protagonist confusion would be expected to respond by giving the protagonist significantly more often than the narrator or a noncharacter. The narrator/protagonist confusion is arguable only for the 4-year-olds, who did identify the narrator and protagonists equally often for the Multiple Narrator passages. However, the 4-year-olds continued to identify the narrator equally often as the protagonists for the Nonprotagonist Narrator passages, which would not be expected under the narrator/protagonist confusion hypothesis. The results from the three other ages do not support a narrator/protagonist confusion hypothesis. The 3-year-olds responded randomly, and the 6-year-olds correctly; and the responses for the 5-year-olds, while not significantly above chance for correctly identifying the narrator, are not concentrated on the protagonist either. While the narrator's relative importance in the passages has some effect, the pattern is not straightforward. The 6-year-olds showed greater than chance ability to identify the narrator for the Multiple Protagonists passages, and only chance performance on the Nonprotagonist Narrator passages, indicating that the narrator is easier for them to identify if important in the story. The adult subjects also had slightly more difficulty identifying a nonprotagonist narrator.

The overall conclusions from Experiment 1 are that only the 6-year-olds are able to identify the narrator of a story, and that their ability is sensitive to narrator importance within the story. Both 4- and 5-year-olds do not appear to have a true understanding of the concept of the narrator, but their responses suggest that some transitional process is occurring. Therefore a second experiment was conducted to clarify the

factors which influence children's ability to understand the concept of the narrator, and to identify a story's narrator under several different conditions which exist in the stories children encounter.

Experiment 2

Our hypotheses about the kinds of difficulties young children might have in identifying the narrator of a story are based on some general considerations about cognitive development in comprehension of prose. Young children rely heavily on their own experience in comprehending new material (as do older people), and the familiar may sometimes interfere with the comprehension of new information. According to Piaget (1974/1926), young children's understanding of the world is characterized by egocentrism, an inability to take the perspective of another when that other perspective is different from the child's own. Egocentric thought appears not to be an absolute, but a set of default assumptions made when the demands of a task are considerable (Flavell, 1977; Shatz, 1977). The issue of egocentrism in comprehension has received less consideration, but it is likely that the same pattern applies. Young children may not be egocentric if the comprehension task is otherwise easy, but will fall back on their own perspectives when the task is more difficult.

Several studies have shown that young children tend to make inferences based on their own experiences and that their ability to make inferences based on information actually in the text develops slowly throughout the grade school years (Brown, Smiley, Day, Townsend, & Lawton, 1977; Paris & Lindauer, 1976, 1977; Paris & Upton, 1976). Hidi & Hildyard (1979) showed that 4- and 5-year-old children drew their inferences less from the text

itself than from their own experience. The inferences required in these studies were for the most part inferences about gaps in action sequences, or characters' internal states, but it seems reasonable to suppose that inferences about the narrator would follow the same general pattern. The constructive comprehension of narratives makes miscomprehension based on children's own experiences quite likely. Extending this reasoning to children's understanding of the narrator, we hypothesized that young children may initially identify the narrator's point of view with their own point of view, and that their ability to make the types of inferences required for understanding point of view will improve with age.

From the wide range of possible narrator characteristics we chose to focus on age, sex and temporal position. These three characteristics are very salient to children and can be independently varied in a text: the narrator may be old or young, male or female, and speaking from the past or present. If children are egocentric, or show biases with respect to these characteristics, then comprehension of a narrator will be easiest if the narrator is similar to the child on each of the above dimensions. A narrator who is old, the opposite sex, and speaking from the past would be more difficult to identify than one who is young, the same sex as the child, and speaking from the present. When children make errors in identifying a narrator, these errors should tend to reflect the child's biased point of view.

The assessment of children's understanding of the narrator was conducted in 3 parts, all focusing on the child's understanding of the narrator's identity. Part 1 investigated the ability of young children to

understand and identify the narrator when age and sex of the narrator were manipulated. Part 2 investigated the effect of multiple narrators, in which the narrator changed during the narrative. Part 3 investigated the effect of temporal perspective differences on children's comprehension of the narrator.

General Methods for Experiment 2

Materials. The stories used in Experiment 2 were very similar to those used in Experiment 1. The characters in the stories were represented by the same four-doll family members, which were also used in the testing procedure, and the same sorts of cues to the narrator's identity were used. All the stories were written with a first-person narrator who was one of the characters in the story. Specific manipulations in the stories will be described in separate materials sections for Parts 1-3 of the experiment.

Subjects. There were 100 children tested for Experiment 2: 16 at each of ages 3, 4, 5; 28 at age 6; and 12 at each of ages 8 and 10. The participation of the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds was solicited through local preschools. (Half the 5-year-old children were in a public school kindergarten.) The 6-, 8-, and 10-year-old children were all tested at a local public school. Half of the children were male and half were female at each age. Twenty-five adult subjects were used to rate the stories for character importance, and 16 adults were used to provide adult control data on the experimental tasks. These adult subjects were serving in the experiment as part of a course requirement in introductory psychology.

Procedure. The procedure for Experiment 2 was identical to that of Experiment 1, except that no practice passage was used. Instructions were the same as for Experiment 1, except that the older children were simply

told that the doll family was available to help them remember who might tell a story. Subjects aged 3 and 4 heard three passages, two from Part 1 and one from Part 2. Subjects aged 5, 6, 8, and 10 heard four passages: two from Part 1, and one each from Parts 2 and 3. There were two passages of each type, so the particular passage used was counterbalanced across subjects, and the order of presentation of the passages was randomized. After each passage, the child was asked, "Who is telling the story?" The children responded either by indicating a doll or naming a family member as in Experiment 1.

Part 1: Narrator Identity

Part 1 was designed to determine children's ability to identify the narrator of a story. The age and sex of the narrator were systematically varied, to test our hypotheses about egocentric understanding of point of view.

Materials. The eight passages of Part 1 were designed to determine whether age- or sex-based biases in comprehension influenced the children's ability to identify a first-person narrator from cues available in the text. Half of the narratives in Part 1 had an adult narrator, and half had a child narrator. Additionally, half had a male narrator, and half a female narrator. Age and sex of narrator were completely crossed. Because we wanted to test for age and sex biases over as broad an age range as possible, it was necessary to use two sets of Narrator Identity passages. There were four very brief narratives of approximately 150 words for the younger subjects ("easy" passages), and four longer, more complex passages of approximately 350 words for the older subjects ("hard" passages). In

the longer narratives, designed for the older elementary-school children, we began the passages with no cues to the narrator's identity, and added increasingly more evidence as the passage continued. This allowed us to determine the default assumptions of the older children in the face of little or no evidence for the narrator's identity. By increasing the evidence for the narrator as the passage continued, we could also investigate the way that grade-school children responded to evidence that might be counter to their initial expectations.

Twenty-five adult subjects rated the importance of the characters in all the experimental passages on a 1-10 scale, where 1 was "not important at all," and 10 was "very important." Across all the easy Narrator Identity passages, the mean importance rating for the narrators was 8.14, slightly more important than that for the other two characters, 6.63. The differences were not significant for "Halloween" and for "Funny Noise" but were significant ($p < .05$) for "Keeping Quiet" ($t(48) = 1.99$) and "Birthday Party" ($t(48) = 3.53$). A sample passage ("Halloween") is given in the Appendix.

Subjects. Subjects were obtained as described in the general methods section. Within the 28 6-year-olds, 16 (randomly chosen) were tested on the easy narrator identity passages, and the remaining 12 (randomly chosen) were tested on the hard passages. The two groups of 6-year-olds allowed us to have overlapping data for easy and hard stories. Ten adult subjects read the passages and identified the narrator in a pencil and paper version of the children's task.

Procedure. The general procedure is given in the general methods section. The children aged 3 through 5 and 16 of the 6-year-olds heard one

easy adult narrator passage and one easy child narrator passage. Twelve 6-year-olds, and the 8- and 10-year-olds heard one hard adult narrator passage and one hard child narrator passage. They were asked the narrator identity question four times during each passage (at the end of each successive quarter of the text).

Results and Discussion for Part 1

The results from Part 1 are reported in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 contains the data from the preschoolers, and Table 3 contains the data from the older children. The data are summed across stories in each condition.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here.

A chi-square analysis showed that there was no significant passage effect. The first data to be considered are the total correct responses for the easy and hard passages (first line of Tables 2 and 3). These are responses in which the children correctly named the narrator. The younger children, on the easy narratives, show some minimal ability to correctly identify the narrator and there is a large improvement in accuracy at age 6 ($\chi^2(1) = 10.22$, $p < .01$).

Note that the results reported in Table 3 for the 'hard' passages for "answers after first quarter" are the results after the subject has had little information about the narrator's identity. The results after the end of the passage, when all the information is available, are also reported in Table 3, and only the 10-year-olds and adults can invariably identify the narrator after hearing all the evidence. The easy and hard passages may be compared by looking at the results of the 6-year-olds.

Note that for overall correct responses, the 6-year-olds got 59.4% correct on the easy passages compared to 50.0% for the hard passages after the first segment, and 62.5% at the end of the hard passages. Therefore the two sets of passages are quite comparable, allowing us to discuss age transitions across passage type.

Analysis by age of narrator. If there is an age bias in response or comprehension, we would expect the children to show a tendency to identify the narrator as a child. This would result in more errors involving the narrator's age when the narrator is an adult than when the narrator is a child. Tables 2 and 3 show the children's responses to the question "Who is telling the story?" when only the age of narrator (i.e., child vs. adult) of the response is considered. The data were analyzed by sign tests at each age. For the prechoolers (Table 2) there is no significant difference between their responses on the child and adult narrator passages, when age alone is considered, although there is a general improvement for both as the children get older. When older children have heard only one-fourth of the evidence for the narrator on the hard passages, they show some tendency to assume an adult narrator, which is the opposite of the expected finding. However, the difference between Adult and Child Narrator passages (for first and last segment answers) across ages is not significant. The 6-year-olds are at ceiling on the easy passages, but show some (non-significant) indication that the adult narrator was easier to identify in the hard passages. Certainly these data provide little evidence for age-based biases.

Analysis by sex of narrator. Sex-based biases in responding or comprehension should produce a pattern of responding in which children are

better at identifying a narrator the same sex as themselves. The results of the children's responses by sex of child and sex of narrator are given in Tables 2 and 3. Boys show a pattern of sex-biases with a strong tendency to respond correctly more often when the narrator is also male (except at age 4). A sign test was used to test the hypothesis that children will respond correctly to a same-sex narrator and incorrectly to a different-sex narrator. Boys correctly identify a same-sex narrator significantly more accurately than a different-sex narrator on the easy passages at age 6 (sign test, $p < .05$). The preschool girls also show a pattern of sex biases (significant $p < .05$ at age 5 by a sign test), but, unlike the boys, it effectively vanishes by age 6. The 6-year-old boys show more sex bias on the easy passages and the hard passages at the end than they do on the hard passages after the first quarter, when they may be less certain of their responses (significant by Fischer Exact Test for hard passages, last quarter and for easy passages, $p < .05$). One of the most striking results of the analysis for identification by sex is the sex biases shown by 6- and 8-year-old boys on the hard passages. Even after all the evidence has been presented, the boys are only slightly above chance at identifying female narrators. This difficulty in identifying female narrators comes in the face of such overt clues as "I was busy sewing a dress," or "I was the happiest little girl in town." Children who make errors in narrator identification in the face of such overt clues may in fact have a very contradictory mental representation of the story itself.

Part 2: Multiple Narrators

In children's literature it is not uncommon to have a change in narrator with change in the scene of the action, or an intrusive narrator who interrupts with commentary. A change in narrator would introduce conflicting cues to the narrator's identity, and the child would have to suspend the first understanding of the narrator and construct a new one. Part 2 looks at the effects on children's comprehension of the narrator when the narrator is changed in the course of a narrative. We hypothesized that once children identify the narrator, they may be unwilling or unable to change their first hypothesis in the face of conflicting evidence, and thus this literary device might prove confusing to young children.

Materials. Part 2 used narratives in which the narrator changed one-third of the way through the passage, and then changed back to the original narrator for the final third of the passage. Two narratives were written, one of which shifted from male child narrator, to female adult, and back to male child narrator ("The Shirt") and one of which shifted from a female adult narrator, to a female child, to a female adult ("The Zoo"). For the multiple narrator passages, the 25 adults rated the "frame narrators" who began and ended the passages (on a 1-10 scale, where 1 was "not important" and 10 was "very important") a mean of 7.86. The "center narrators" were rated a mean of 7.38. This difference was not statistically significant when analyzed by a *t*-test. A sample story is included in the Appendix.

Subjects. Subjects were 16 children at each of ages 3 through 6; 12 each at ages 8 and 10, and 10 adults as described in the General Methods for Experiment 2.

Procedure. The procedure is the same as that described in the general methods section. The experimental question "Who is telling the story?" was asked after each third of the narrative, at the points of change between two different narrators.

Results and Discussion for Part 2

Children who are unable to shift narrators would be expected to show a pattern of correct responses for the original narrator, errors for the second narrator and then correct responses after the shift back to the original narrator. Children who are generally disrupted by narrator shifts should show correct responses for the first narrator and then increasing errors after the shift to the second and third narrators. The actual results, given in Table 4, show that the children performed well on a task we expected to be difficult. While correct responses increased with age, there was no effect of switching the narrator twice within a narrative. Rather than maintaining a rigid narrator choice, or showing generally lowered performance after a shift in the narrator, the children in general responded as accurately after a narrator shift as they had done before each

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Insert Table 4 about here.

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shift. These data were analyzed by the Cochran Q test for related samples from the same subjects. The results of the three questioning periods were not significantly different for children aged 4 through 10. The only exception to this pattern was the results of the 3-year-olds, who showed a tendency for disruption by narrator shifts. They gave 56.3% correct responses for the original narrator and 25% for the two shifted conditions ($Q(2) = 11.64$, $p < .01$). The 3-year-olds' correct responses after the

first segment is the only category where children of that age had a correct identification rate greater than chance (25% in this case). However, the results of Experiment 1 and of the older children in this experiment suggest this finding is merely a chance occurrence. At no other age is there any apparent effect of narrator shift.

Part 3: Temporal Perspective

This part of the experiment was designed to test children's understanding of a narrator who is distant in time from the main action of the narrative. There were two temporal perspective passages ("The Beach" and "The Horse"), and in both cases an adult told a narrative about his or her childhood. One narrator was male and one female. A sample passage (The Beach) is given in the Appendix.

Subjects. The subjects were as described in the general methods section. This task was not given to children ages 3 and 4 since pilot work suggested that it was too difficult for them. There were 16 adult control subjects.

Results and Discussion for Part 3

On the temporal perspective passages chance responding was 25% correct naming the adult narrator, 25% naming the child protagonist, and 50% naming a noncharacter (a doll-family member not in the particular passage). Results are given in Table 5. There is a general improvement in the

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Insert Table 5 about here.

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ability to identify the narrator with age, but with a striking drop at age 6 (significantly below chance, $\chi^2(2) = 12.83$, $p < .01$). The ability to

identify the narrator rises significantly above chance levels in the 8-year-old group ($\chi^2(2) = 12.8$, $p < .01$) and for the 10-year-olds ($\chi^2(2) = 16.5$, $p < .01$). The performance of the 5-year-old children is not statistically different from chance.

The Temporal Perspective passages used in Part 3 contained a central narrative about the actions of a child surrounded by a brief "frame" containing the characteristics of the adult narrator. Most of the 6-year-olds' errors were in naming the child protagonist rather than the narrator. As in Experiment 1, a very salient protagonist reduces 6-year-olds' accuracy in identifying the narrator. In general the data showed a slow gradual development of the ability to understand the temporal perspective of the narratives, but it was clearly a difficult task, as shown by the fact that only 75% of the adult subjects gave the correct answer.

General Discussion

The author/narrator's point of view is one of the more "literary" aspects of discourse, and has received little attention in previous studies of children's understanding of text. When children can identify the narrator correctly, we know that they have some concept of a narrator. If children can identify such narrator features as age and sex and locate that narrator in time and space, then they are using the cues in the text correctly to understand the narrator. In the kinds of narratives intended for older readers, the narrator may have a distinctive attitude such as a political point of view. The ability to identify the cues to the narrator's point of view in prose of this sort is essential to the understanding of the message of the narrative. In fact, many children's

stories have a very moralistic overtone, but do not have a salient, visible narrator. In these cases, young children might have difficulty in identifying the narrator, and might either associate the moral values with the salient character, or might not attend to them at all because the moral comments were not attributable to anyone. Identifying the narrator's point of view is an important aspect of a mature understanding of narrative prose.

In this series of experiments the most striking findings were obtained in the analyses of age and sex biases in children's identification of narrators (Experiment 2, Part 1). We expected the youngest children to show age-based biases, but the data did not support this hypothesis. There was no evidence for age-based biases in the pattern of responses for the younger children, and the older children showed some tendency to make an adult the default narrator when little information was present. It is apparently not difficult for children to accept the occurrence of adult narrators, perhaps due to the fact that adults write and tell most of the stories that children experience.

While there was no evidence for age biases, there was evidence for sex based biases in males aged 3 to 8 and in younger females age 3 to 5. The persistence of this type of bias in the 6- and 8-year-old males is surprising. After the first section of the hard passages, egocentrism may determine default assumptions. However, even after a passage was complete and they had been exposed to a series of overt cues to the narrator's sex (e.g., "I was the happiest little girl in town," or sex-role stereotyped actions such as sewing) these children frequently maintained that the narrator was a male. To believe that a female narrator was male, the boys

had to ignore or alter a good many facts about the narrative. It seems likely that their mental representation of the narratives was very different from that intended by the author. The preschool girls show as strong a pattern of sex biases as do the young boys, but by the age of six years the girls cease to show the bias.

The children in Experiment 2, Part 3, found that temporal perspective made narrator identification difficult. Apparently it is difficult for young children (and some adults) to understand that the child in the core story is the narrator at an earlier age and to remember that the adult individual in the frame narrative surrounding the core is the true narrator. The problem with temporal perspective may also be a special case of problems created by a nonprotagonist narrator.

Some of our other results did not support our predictions. We had originally thought that the younger children might identify the narrator as the physical person reading the story out loud to the child. However, it is clear that children must master this distinction quite early, since only two of almost 150 children made this confusion in their initial response to the narrator question. We also found that the literary technique of shifting narrators was not particularly confusing for the children.

The overall developmental picture for narrator identity suggested by these results is that 3-year-old children were responding randomly. The 4-year-old children were selectively choosing a nonnarrator character as the narrator, but limited their responses to characters in the passages. The 5-year-olds showed some ability to identify the narrator, and the 6-year-olds had developed the ability to identify the narrators of texts when the

passage was simple. However, such factors as the greater importance of another character, sex-based biases in responding or a distant temporal perspective can cause misunderstandings of the narrator even in 8- or 10-year-olds. Because the greatest difficulties in understanding the narrator of a story occur precisely at those ages when children are learning to read, it is important to consider the position of the narrator in reading materials given in the primary grades, and in how these materials are taught.

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Footnote

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Table 1

Experiment 1: Narrator Identification with Narrator Importance Controlled

	Percent of Subjects Responding[a]					
	Multiple Protagonist Passages			Nonprotagonist Narrator Passages		
Age of Subject	Narrator	Other Characters	Non Character	Narrator	Other Characters	Non Character
3	37.5	37.5	25.0	12.5	75.0	12.5
4	25.0	75.0	0.0	18.7	81.3	0.0
5	43.8	43.8	12.5	37.5	31.3	31.3
6	62.5	37.5	0.0	31.3	56.3	12.5
Adult	100.0	0.0	0.0	87.5	12.5[b]	0.0

Note. n = 16 for each age of children; n = 10 for adults.

[a]chance scores are Narrator-25%; Other characters-50%; Noncharacter-25%

[b]these are hedges ("someone older"), not incorrect

Table 2

Experiment 2, Part 1: Percent Correct Narrator Identity for Easy Stories

Scoring Criterion	Age of Subjects				
	3	4	5	6	Adult
Correct response[a]	37.5	21.9	31.3	59.4	94.4
Age correct[b]					
Child narrator	56.3	56.3	62.5	93.8	100.0
Adult narrator	56.3	56.3	62.5	100.0	100.0
Sex correct[b]					
Boys: same sex narrator	85.7	37.5	66.7	100.0	--
Boys: different sex narrator	62.5	62.5	28.6	28.6	--
Girls: same sex narrator	87.5	50.0	70.0	55.6	--
Girls: different sex narrator	42.9	12.5	16.7	42.9	--

Note. n = 16 for ages 3, 4, 5, 6 and n = 10 for adults

[a]Chance score is 25%

[b]Chance score is 50%

Table 3

Experiment 2, Part 1: Percent Correct Narrator Identity for Hard Stories

Scoring Criterion	Age of Subjects			
	6	8	10	Adult
Answers After First Quarter				
Correct response[a]	50.0	62.5	66.7	80.6
Age correct[b]				
Child narrator	58.3	75.0	100.0	93.8
Adult narrator	83.3	83.3	91.7	100.0
Sex correct[b]				
Boys: same sex narrator	83.3	80.0	100.0	--
Boys: different sex narrator	66.7	42.9	87.5	--
Girls: same sex narrator	50.0	80.0	50.0	--
Girls: different sex narrator	66.6	85.7	50.0	--
Answers at End of Narrative				
Correct response[a]	62.5	70.8	100.0	100.0
Age correct[b]				
Child narrator	66.7	83.3	100.0	100.0
Adult narrator	91.7	75.0	100.0	100.0
Sex correct[b]				
Boys: same sex narrator	100.0	100.0	100.0	--
Boys: different sex narrator	67.7	57.1	100.0	--
Girls: same sex narrator	67.7	100.0	100.0	--
Girls: different sex narrator	50.0	100.0	100.0	--

Note. n = 12 for ages 6, 8, 10 and n = 10 for adults

[a]Chance score is 25%.

[b]Chance score is 50%.

Table 4

Experiment 2, Part 2: Percent Correct Narrator Choices for Multiple Narrator Stories

Correct Responses[a]	Age of Subjects						
	3	4	5	6	8	10	Adult
First narrator	56.3	37.5	12.4	50.0	75.0	83.0	91.7
Second narrator	25.0	37.5	37.5	62.5	83.0	75.0	100.0
Third narrator[b]	25.0	25.0	18.8	43.8	83.0	91.7	100.0

Note. n = 16 for ages 3, 4, 5, and 6; n = 12 for ages 8, 10; n = 10 for adults.

[a]Chance score is 25%.

[b]The third narrator is a shift back to the first narrator.

Table 5

Experiment 2, Part 3: Temporal Perspective Percent Responding in Each Category

	Number of Subjects Responding[a]		
Age of Subject	Adult Narrator	Child Protagonist	Other
5	41.7	33.3	25.0
6	16.7	66.7	8.3
8	66.7	25.0	8.3
10	75.0	16.7	8.3
Adult	75.0	25.0	0.0

Note. n = 12 for each age of children; n = 10 for adults.

[a]Chance score for n = 12 would be Adult Narrator-25%; Child Protagonist-25%; Other-50%.

APPENDIX

Sample Experimental Passages

Experiment 1: Going Fishing (Multiple Protagonists)

My brother Bobby, my Daddy and I go fishing a lot. I skip my girl scout meeting to go. Daddy drives to the lake, and we rent a boat. Dad rows the boat into the middle of the lake, and then we fish from the boat. One day, I felt a pull on my fishing line. I thought I had a very big fish. I pulled hard, and Daddy helped, and something big came out of the water. But it was not a fish, it was a bicycle tire. Bobby started laughing. He laughed so hard that he fell out of the boat. Bobby couldn't swim. Daddy jumped in to save him. I kept the boat from floating away. Dad swam hard, and he pulled Bobby and himself back into the boat. Bobby felt something wiggling in his Tee-shirt. He had caught a fish in his shirt. So we had a fish to bring home after all. We had it for dinner, and it tasted good.

Experiment 1: Going Fishing (Nonprotagonist Narrator)

My brother Bobby and my daddy go fishing a lot. I stay at home so I can go to girl scouts. Daddy drives to the lake, and he and Bobby rent a boat. Dad rows the boat to the middle of the lake, and then he and Bobby fish from the boat. One day, my Dad felt a pull on his fishing line. He thought he had a very big fish. Daddy pulled hard, and something big came out of the water. But it was not a fish, it was a bicycle tire. Bobby started laughing. He laughed so hard that he fell out of the boat. Bobby couldn't swim, so Daddy jumped in to save him. The boat began to float away. Dad swam hard, and he pulled

Bobby and himself back into the boat. Bobby felt something wiggling in his clothes. He had caught a fish in his Tee-shirt, so Daddy and Bobby had a fish to bring home after all. We had it for dinner, and it tasted good.

Experiment 2, Part 1: "Easy" Female Adult Narrator Passage "Halloween"

Last Halloween I made costumes for the children in the family. I asked each of the children what they wanted to be for Halloween. Susie wanted to be a ghost, so I cut holes in a pillowcase for her. Bobby wanted to be a bluebird. A bluebird costume is harder than a ghost costume. I was worried that I couldn't make a good bluebird costume for Bobby. How could I make my son look like a bluebird for Halloween? First I went to the store and bought some blue pajamas. Then I got some bright blue paint and painted on feathers. Now all he needed were wings. I thought hard about wings, and then I got out some cardboard, and cut out two wing shapes. I painted blue feathers on the paper wings. I planned to pin them on Bobby's sleeves. When Bobby got home from school, I asked him to try on the bluebird costume. Bobby put on the bluebird pajama suit, and it looked very nice on him. Then I got out the wings. Bobby took one look at them and said "No, Mom. I won't wear those." I told him that bluebirds had to have wings. But Bobby refused to wear the wings. That night, my husband and I took the children trick-or-treating. Bobby wore the blue pajama suit. Everyone thought he looked like a lovely blue fish. Bobby couldn't understand why they thought he was a fish. But I said to Bobby, "You can't be a bird without wings."

Experiment 2, Part 2: Multiple Narrator Passage "The Shirt"

I was out playing ball in the lot behind our house yesterday afternoon. I was still in my schoolclothes. Johnny and Joe and I took off our jackets and put them under the bushes. Then we tossed the ball around for a while, seeing how far we could throw it. We decided to play "keep-away," and I got to be in the middle first. After about ten minutes, Joe threw a wild ball and I had to run into the bushes to get it. I caught the ball, but my shirt snagged on the bushes and tore a hole in the back. Just then my mother called. "Oh, no" I thought. "She sure will be mad at me." But I went on home, wondering how to keep from telling her about the shirt.

When Bobby came home for dinner last night he acted very strangely. He was all dirty from playing ball, so I told him to take off his jacket and go wash up. He went and washed his hands. But he came to dinner with his jacket on. I told him to take it off and sit down. He took off the jacket, but inched around the table with his back turned to me. He sat down across the table from me, and ate very quickly. I wondered what he was up to. "Please, can I be excused" he said soon. "Sure," I said. He got up from the table, and walked backwards out of the room. I let him go, and wondered what was wrong with him.

Mom looked at me with a funny look on her face as I backed out of the dining room. But it was the only way I could keep her from seeing my shirt. I went up to my room. Then I heard her coming upstairs. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Why did you walk backwards out of the room?" I decided that I would have to tell her. Slowly I turned around and showed

her the rip in my shirt. "Oh, that's not so bad," she said. "It will be easy to mend. I'll show you how to do it." So my mom wasn't mad. But I had to learn to fix the shirt myself.

Experiment 2, Part 3: Temporal Perspective "The Beach"

When I was a little girl my father used to take me to the beach every Sunday. We would have a picnic, and then I would go swimming or collect seashells. One summer Sunday my father decided to take a nap while I went for a walk along the beach. It was a hot day, and pretty soon I felt like taking a quick swim to cool off. I took off my sandals to go wading and then I walked out into the water. It was very cool and pleasant. As I walked, the water came up to my knees, then up to the bottom of my shorts. I decided to turn around and walk back to the shore. I took one more step, and suddenly fell into the water. It was over my head, and very dark green. There was a deep hole under the water. I had fallen into the hole. Luckily, I was a good swimmer so I started swimming until I could stand on the bottom again. I got out of the water alright, but my shorts were all wet. When I got back to my father, he yelled at me. But I hadn't meant to go swimming, so I couldn't understand why he was so mad. I was angry with him then, but now I know I'd yell at my own children if they did that.